

The New York Times

U.S.

Christian Music's New Wave Caters to Audience of One

By JOHN LELAND APRIL 17, 2004

Even before the music started Thursday night, the 3,000 young people who filled the Beacon Theater in Manhattan for a free event called the Passion Experience were getting loud.

"We love Jesus, how about you," chanted a group in one corner, inciting a competitive echo from across the room. As the first band plugged in, the audience sang along, repeating choruses of praise from four giant video screens: "You are my drink," they sang. "You are my feast."

Two decades after Christian rock bands began to fill theaters, the popularity of the Passion Experience tour, billed not as a concert but as a "worship gathering" for college students, reflects a groundswell both within churches and in the Christian music marketplace.

The songs' popularity comes not from Christian radio, but from churches. And the musicians -- who call themselves "worship leaders" rather than performers -- sing not about God, but to God. The audience sings as much as they do.

Praise and worship music, as the songs are known, has long been a part of Christian music, cultivated in churches and distributed to a small but passionate audience through independent labels. But in the last half decade, it has become a

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Contemporary praise songs have largely replaced hymns in most churches, said Howard Rachinski, president of Christian Copyright Licensing International, a company that follows the music performed in 137,000 churches.

The music, which can take any style -- like rock, country or pop -- is often described as "vertical," because it is directed upward, by band and audience alike. "You're not connecting to the band, you're directly connecting to God, one on one," said Craig Steelman, 18, who drove from Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., for the concert.

The success of the songs outside the church reverses a longstanding assumption within the Christian music business, said Deborah Evans Price, who writes about Christian music for Billboard magazine. "For years people thought that for Christian music to explode it needed to be watered down," she said.

Instead, she said, audiences increasingly want "something more spiritually meaty" than Christian pop. "People don't want Christian lite," she said.

Sales of praise and worship albums have doubled since 2000, to about 12 million in 2003. While music sales over all slumped last year, including Christian music in general, worship music was up 5 percent. A series of CD's marketed on television by Time-Life, "Songs 4 Worship," has drawn a million subscribers and sold about 8 million CD's since 2000.

Several Christian pop stars, including Michael W. Smith, Newsboys and Third Day, have recently recorded worship albums, often to the biggest successes of their careers.

"What's selling now is compilations and praise and worship," said John W. Styll, president of the Gospel Music Association in Nashville. For this music, he added, "Church is the new radio. It's where people learn about songs, and how songwriters get compensated."

The Passion Experience tour, which last year played 35 cities, chose New York, which is not considered friendly ground for Christian music, to draw area Christians out of isolation, said Shelley Giglio, who started Passion in 1997 with her husband,

Louie, as an outgrowth of a student ministry they formed at Baylor University in the 1980's.

"They'll see college students that look like them, wear their clothes and believe," said Ms. Giglio, 39. "This generation has a desire to be more extreme in its faith. Going to church is not enough to survive on earth. They need to be in a living, breathing conversation with God."

Daneal Flohr, a junior at Suffolk County Community College on Long Island, said that while she admired Christian pop, she got a deeper faith experience from praise songs like those at the Passion Experience. "We're learning now that you can worship all the time," she said.

Her enthusiasm mirrors national trends among college students, according to surveys by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. Last fall, 13.4 percent of freshmen identified themselves as evangelical Christians, up from 4.5 percent in 1990.

Inside churches, the rise of rock-based worship music reflects a turning point in the "worship wars," which since the 1970's pitted supporters of traditional hymns against rock or folk-oriented sounds, said Clay Schmit, a professor of preaching and worship at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif.

"In the past, praise music was justifiably criticized as being light theologically," he said. "Now praise music writers are asking deeper questions and turning to scriptures."

At the same time, technology at many churches, especially large megachurches, has replaced the hymn book with video projections of lyrics that can be downloaded from the Internet. Christian labels sell DVD's that include printable lyrics, backing music and computer graphics so congregations can sing the new songs.

Like the megachurches, the music has drawn criticism for emphasizing individual experiences. "A lot of it is interfacing with narcissism," said Robert E. Webber, a professor of ministry at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Ill.

"The dominant word in these songs is I," he said. "It's 'I enthrone you,' 'I love you.' The focus is not on God but how I experience God. We congratulate God for being God. Theologically, that says I, a creature of God, have something to contribute to God's well-being."

But a recurring theme at Passion, besides the act of praise, was the diminution of the individual. Louie Giglio spoke to the crowd for about half an hour and prayed for "death to me and my story, and life to something so much bigger."

To loud applause, he said, "You're not the center of anything, and stop trying to get life to revolve around you," because, he said, life revolves around God.

Some worship music bands perform at services when not on tour. Two performers, David Crowder and Chris Tomlin, started their own churches for the kind of college-age seekers drawn to their music.

Mr. Crowder helped start University Baptist Church in Waco, Tex., while he was a music student at Baylor; he started writing songs so he would have something to sing. They spread to other churches well before Mr. Crowder became visible to the Passion organizers or the music business.

"It was underground, but now it's just exploded," he said. "The Internet connects all these smaller subcultural units. For us, a small band in Waco, it disseminated our songs all over the world."

At the end of the evening, Mr. Giglio asked for an offering, to be used to bring the tour to another uncharted territory. A trickle of students came forward to contribute. The video screens closed with the words, "Sacred Revolution."

Michelle Salviejo, a sophomore at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., beamed after a night of crying and singing and jumping. "It was amazing feeling God's presence," she said. Though she liked the songs, she said, "It wasn't the bands, it was God that was great."